

# North East Indian Linguistics

Volume 4

Edited by

Gwendolyn Hyslop  
Stephen Morey  
Mark W. Post

North East  
Indian Linguistics Society

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BOOKS

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Gwendolyn Hyslop • Stephen Morey • Mark W. Post

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## Foreword

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When I first began research on Tibeto-Burman and Southeast Asian languages as a postgraduate student in 1975, North East India was a huge informational vacuum. Not that there was that much information to be had on Tibeto-Burman languages in general, but for the North East we had only the tantalizing snippets of the *Linguistic Survey of India* and a handful of colonial-era jottings. Of course, many years earlier the publication of the *LSI* made North East India better documented linguistically than many other corners of the earth, and made early comparative work on Tibeto-Burman possible. But time moves on, and while the fragmentary and primitive documentation provided by the *LSI* and the efforts of enthusiastic but untrained missionaries and authors fueled the pioneering work of Konow and others, by the time I entered the field there was little more that could be done with the superficial documentation available. And this seemed likely to be the situation for the foreseeable future, since the region was generally inaccessible to outsiders at the time, and almost nothing was being done locally. For those of us outside India the valiant efforts of intrepid Indian linguists like K. Das Gupta and I. M. Simon gave us only tantalizing glimpses of the linguistic riches that someday might be available to the world of linguistics.

While there remain many linguist-years of work to be done in the North East, the situation today is dramatically different. The past twenty years have seen the appearance of a number of high-quality, modern grammatical descriptions, including Shobhana Chelliah's *Grammar of Meithei*, Robbins Burling's *Language of the Moduphur Mandi (Garó)*, U. V. Joseph's *Rabha*, Seino van Breugel's *Grammar of Atong*, Alec Coupe's *Grammar of Mongsén Ao*, Mark Post's *Grammar of Galo*, Helga

So-Harmann's *Descriptive Grammar of Daai Chin*, Stephen Morey's *Tai Languages of Assam* and *Turung: A Variety of Singpho Language Spoken in Assam*, and more on the way. Particularly heartening is the strong interest in language documentation among linguists from the North East itself, and particularly the commitment of the Linguistics Departments at Gauhati University, Manipur University, NEHU and Tezpur University to the study of languages of the North East. And the most important sign of all is the growing interest and commitment among linguists and community language activists throughout the North East itself in documenting and developing the languages of North East India – and the most striking evidence of this interest is the growth of the North East Indian Linguistic Society Conference, whose fourth annual meeting is represented in this volume.

North East India is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world, with over 100, and perhaps as many as 200, different languages spoken. This indeterminacy is partly due to the problem of deciding when two closely-related varieties should be considered distinct languages, but there is also a lot that we simply don't know – witness the international media attention given to the recent work on Koro, a language of Arunachal Pradesh which had, until recently, received almost no attention from linguists. Very few of these languages have been adequately described, and for many we know nothing at all but a name and perhaps a few inadequately transcribed words.

This presents the world of linguistics with two major challenges, both of which can only be seriously addressed through NEILS or something very much like it. There is the traditional scientific task of documenting, describing and classifying the rich linguistic diversity of the region. And, since this is the twenty-first century, there is the associated issue of making the results of this research accessible and usable to the community which provided the data in the first place. Both of these tasks will have to rely substantially on the efforts and expertise of linguists from India and from abroad, but it is clear that neither will be possible unless the energy and ability of local linguists and language activists from the North East can be mobilized and directed to the problems of language documentation and development.

Recently, there was some notice in the press of an announcement by UNESCO of the extinction of several languages of the North East. The local press as well as local community and national linguistic organizations

raised their voices in indignation that the international organization had falsely listed as extinct some languages which still have numerous speakers – Aimol, the most thriving of the languages on the list, was always the one which was mentioned. None of the reactions which I saw paid any attention to the fact that the list also included languages like Andro and Sekmai which are in fact no longer spoken, as far as anyone knows, and others which are conspicuously endangered. If the UNESCO report was unduly pessimistic, the reaction from the press and community organizations was absurdly optimistic, generally implying that tribal languages in the North East are all healthy and thriving, and outsiders should perhaps take their concern elsewhere.

This little episode illustrates many of the challenges which all of us with an interest in the North East and its languages face. On the one hand, the world outside is so thoroughly ignorant of the situation here that patently false statements about NE languages can get worldwide distribution and attention. On the other, there are indeed languages which have been lost within recent memory, and scores more which are threatened with extinction. For some the threat is very imminent, for others it may not be so easy to see. But the small languages of the North East, and even many of the larger ones, are not so secure as many want to believe. There can be no serious doubt that, as society becomes increasingly urban, and remote communities are increasingly integrated into the regional, national and international economic and informational systems of the twenty-first century, many languages currently spoken on a daily basis will disappear from everyday use. Communities that hope to see their languages still spoken by their descendants a hundred years from now need to take steps right now to strengthen local languages to resist the tide of linguistic assimilation.

Language description as a scholarly enterprise since its earliest days has had a flavor of natural history, of intrepid scholars trekking off to the wilds among the wild men to collect their exotic speech, just as other knowledge seekers trek off into the same wilds to collect exotic plants, animals, or wild man art and artifacts. As the art of scientific language description matured over the course of the twentieth century, a place was more and more found for the native speaker in the business. But even now that we have swung into the new century, language description more often than not operates on the extraction model of colonialist economy, in which raw materials are produced in situ, then taken back home to civilization for

processing. And, as in the economic model, so in the academic the real rewards, economic and otherwise, are gotten back home in the processing process – the conferences, the publications, the positions – and there is not much left behind for the community which produced the resource in the first place.

Thus, the interaction of Western linguists with regions of great linguistic diversity – which necessarily tend to be outside of the main economic and imperialist streams of world history, whose course has steadily reduced linguistic diversity – has tended to follow the same colonialist resource-extraction model that we see in the rest of the relations between the industrialized and non-industrialized parts of the world: data are obtained on-site, then carried back to “civilization”, where they are processed by academics for consumption by other academics. Local people and communities figure in this model merely as sources of data, or at most local hired help for transcription or other initial processing, in much the way that a foreign lumber company might hire locals to fell and dress timber before it is shipped abroad for processing into consumer product. The notion that the ultimate product, such as a grammar or dictionary, might be of some potential use or interest to the people whose language it represents is not a part of this model, much less any thought to whether the local community or individual members of it might have any interest in the business or any potential use for the skills in linguistic analysis which are applied to create the final product.

Nowadays both linguists and threatened language communities are much more aware that language survival in the modern world depends on certain types of “infrastructure”, in the sense of reference materials such as grammar and dictionaries, and on the development of a cadre of local people with the technical skills to maintain and develop that infrastructure, including understanding of the basic principles of phonetics, grammar, and linguistic analysis, and applied skills in language teaching and curriculum development. Facilitating this kind of “capacity development” must be an essential part of all linguistic field research in the twenty-first century.

Capacity development is certainly an ethical imperative. But from a scholarly point of view, it is also a practical necessity. There will never be enough outside expertise to accomplish even the basic task of documenting the languages of the North East, much less to organize and run language development and maintenance programs for every community.

The mismatch between the magnitude of the task and the available linguist-power means that if the job is to be done, it must be done locally. Linguists from India or abroad can offer what help we have, and we can document as much as we can. And this kind of research feeds back into the community – I have often had the experience in North America, where the grandchildren of the last speakers of a language are very happy to have the grammar and dictionary that their grandparents helped some linguist make. But it is a simple fact that most of the linguistic riches of the North East will never be documented, and an absolute certainty that local community languages will not develop and thrive, except by the efforts of linguists and language activists from the communities themselves.

As I write this, four wonderful volumes of NEILS proceedings have been published. These present data on an astonishing range of languages, covering the entire North East and adjacent areas as well: Ahom, Aimol, Ao, Assamese, Atong, Bishnupriya, Boro, Chothe, Dakpa, Dimasa, Karbi, K'cho, Khamti, Khasi, Kurtöp, Manipuri, Mising, Singpho, Tai Phake, Tani, and more. The present volume continues this tradition of diversity, with papers on languages from all four major language families in the North East, and includes also a range of historical and comparative studies, from Assamese philology to Tibeto-Burman reconstruction. In a few short years the NEILS conference, and the published NEIL series of which this volume is the fourth, have become a vital conduit for linguistic research on languages of the North East.

More than this, the conference has served as for exchange of ideas, data, and contacts among language researchers from around the North East. Every year sees a larger and more diverse group of linguists coming together at our winter meeting. This is where the community of linguists is forming which will tame the linguistic wilderness of North East India.

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## A Note from the Editors

We are very pleased to present the fourth volume of papers in the *North East Indian Linguistics* series. The papers in this volume were presented at the fourth NEILS conference, held at the North Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya, from January 16–18, 2009, and organized by the Department of Linguistics, Gauhati University, in collaboration with scholars from the Research Centre for Linguistic Typology, La Trobe University (Melbourne AU). All the papers in this volume have been peer-reviewed and then revised in close consultation with the editors. Final approval for the papers in this volume comes from the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press India Pvt. Ltd. As in previous volumes our aim is to produce a volume reflective of both the linguistic diversity of the North East as well as the high quality of the current research.

The current volume is particularly representative of the diversity of the languages of the North East, the scholars working there, and the various research projects underway. Contributions range from renowned scholars of Tibeto-Burman linguistics to students from the North East making their first impact in the field of Linguistics. The articles in this volume cover four of the language families represented in North East India: Tai-Kadai, Indo-Aryan, Tibeto-Burman, and Austroasiatic and come from scholars based in the U.S., France, Germany, Japan, Norway, and Australia, but with the majority of contributions being from Indian scholars themselves. As in the previous volumes, we are honored to be able to publish so many high-quality papers from a wide range of scholars.

We are also very pleased that Scott DeLancey, currently engaged in collaborative language documentation and description with the Boro community and widely considered an eminent Tibeto-Burman linguist, contributed the foreword to this volume. DeLancey also sets the stage for the first section of this book on History, Contact and Evolution with his article 'On the origins of Boro-Garo', linking linguistic facts with prehistory



to propose a convincing hypothesis on the origin of the Boro-Garo language family. The next paper in this section is Robbins Burling's contribution: an informed and up-to-date stammbaum of the Boro-Garo languages. The article by Zeenat Tabassum describes an innovative modification pattern in Ahom and puts forth the hypothesis that the innovation is due to early contact with Boro-Garo speakers. The final article in this section is a contribution by Linda Konnerth, who explores the nominalizing prefix *\*gV-* in Tibeto-Burman languages of North East India and presents arguments in favour of reconstructing it to Proto-Tibeto-Burman. It will be noted that both 'Bodo' and 'Boro' are used to refer to the language. While 'Bodo' is officially the name of the tribe, both spellings are used, by Bodos and non-Bodos, to refer to the language, and our volume reflects this practice.

The second section in the present volume offers two articles on Boro-Garo grammar, both of which are authored by Gauhati University students who also happen to be native speakers of Boro-Garo languages. Krishna Boro's contribution presents an analysis of serial verbs in a hitherto undescribed variety of Boro, spoken in Gondhmow village, in a mostly Assamese speaking region, outside of the Bodoland Territorial Council. This is followed by an article by Monali Longmailai, presenting information about Dimasa dialects and examining in detail the personal pronouns in Dimasa.

This volume also has a section on Orthography, Poetics and Text with articles by Erik Andvik, Stephen Morey, and Anne Daladier. Andvik's article proposes an 'Ucen (also used for Tibetan) orthography for Tshangla. Tshangla, a Tibeto-Burman language of West Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh, is also spoken in eastern Bhutan. Andvik's proposal, based on the current political and education system in Bhutan, offers innovative solutions for the problems that arise as a result of the mismatch between Tshangla phonology and the way 'Ucen is used in Bhutan to represent the national language, Dzongkha. Heading to the eastern edge of North East India, Morey's paper presents the first analysis of poetics in several languages, including Tai Phake, Singpho and Tangsa varieties. In addition to describing the poetic devices used in these languages, Morey links the data to the typological literature on poetic devices, making his article a contribution not just to North East Indian linguistic studies but to poetics broadly. Finally, returning west and heading south into the Meghalayan hills, Daladier presents an analysis of War narratives. In addition to transcribing and translating

aspects of the narratives, Daladier offers rich ethnographic information about War culture, its pertinence to the narratives, and relating this to other Austroasiatic speaking cultures.

The section on New Descriptions presents phonological analyses of Usoi Tripura and Hajong. Huziwara Keisuke describes the phonology of Usoi, a variety of Kokborok (<Boro-Garo) spoken in the Chittagong Hill Tract. This thorough analysis describes syllable structure and tone as well as consonant and vowel contrasts. Liza Guts describes the phonology of Hajong, a language of Assam and Meghalaya that has been described as Indo-Aryan though some have speculated it may have a Tibeto-Burman substrate.

The current volume also has a section devoted to classifiers. Starting off the section is a description of classifiers in Mising by Sarat Kumar Doley and Mark Post. In addition to presenting the basic structure of classifier constructions, their article furthers our knowledge of historical Tani linguistics. The next two articles address classifiers in Assamese. As we will see, Runima Chowdhary and Gautam Borah differ with regard to their analyses<sup>1</sup>, but we believe these two papers indeed advance our understanding of Assamese classifiers in terms of form, semantics, and use in discourse<sup>1</sup>.

Papers on Eastern Indo-Aryan Grammar and Austroasiatic conclude the volume. The penultimate section begins with Gitanjali Bez's analysis of pronouns in Madhav Kandali's *Ramayana*, a version of the *Ramayana* written in colloquial Assamese of the fourteenth century. Through Bez's presentation of form and function of the pronouns, reference is made, when possible, to historical development of the forms, making her contribution also one of historical Indo-Aryan linguistics. The next two papers deal with synchronic syntactic phenomena in modern-day languages. An article by Madhumita Barbora examines nominalization and nominalized clauses in Assamese and a paper she co-authors with Lucky Dey presents an analysis of copula constructions in Assamese Sadri. The final section in this volume is devoted to Anne Daladier's contribution on serial verb constructions in the Austroasiatic language War, the most detailed discussion of War syntax and semantics to date. Daladier's article, like others in this volume, is rich in data collected through extensive fieldwork and language documentation.

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<sup>1</sup> A more detailed note about these two papers appears in the body of the book.

As in the previous volumes, the editorial duties have been shared equally between the three alphabetically listed co-editors who have worked from Melbourne, Delhi, Ledo, Eugene, Itanagar, or Thimphu communicating with reviewers and authors equally spread around the globe. Our thanks are due to the authors and reviewers whose hard work is reflected in the current volume, the faculty and students of Gauhati University who continue to make NEILS meetings happen, and last but not least to the speakers of the language we find so fascinating.

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